

The Pathways to Resilience Research Project (New Zealand):  
*Whāia to huanui kia toa*

**Review and Analysis  
of Case File Summaries:**

**Report on the Young Person's Voice**

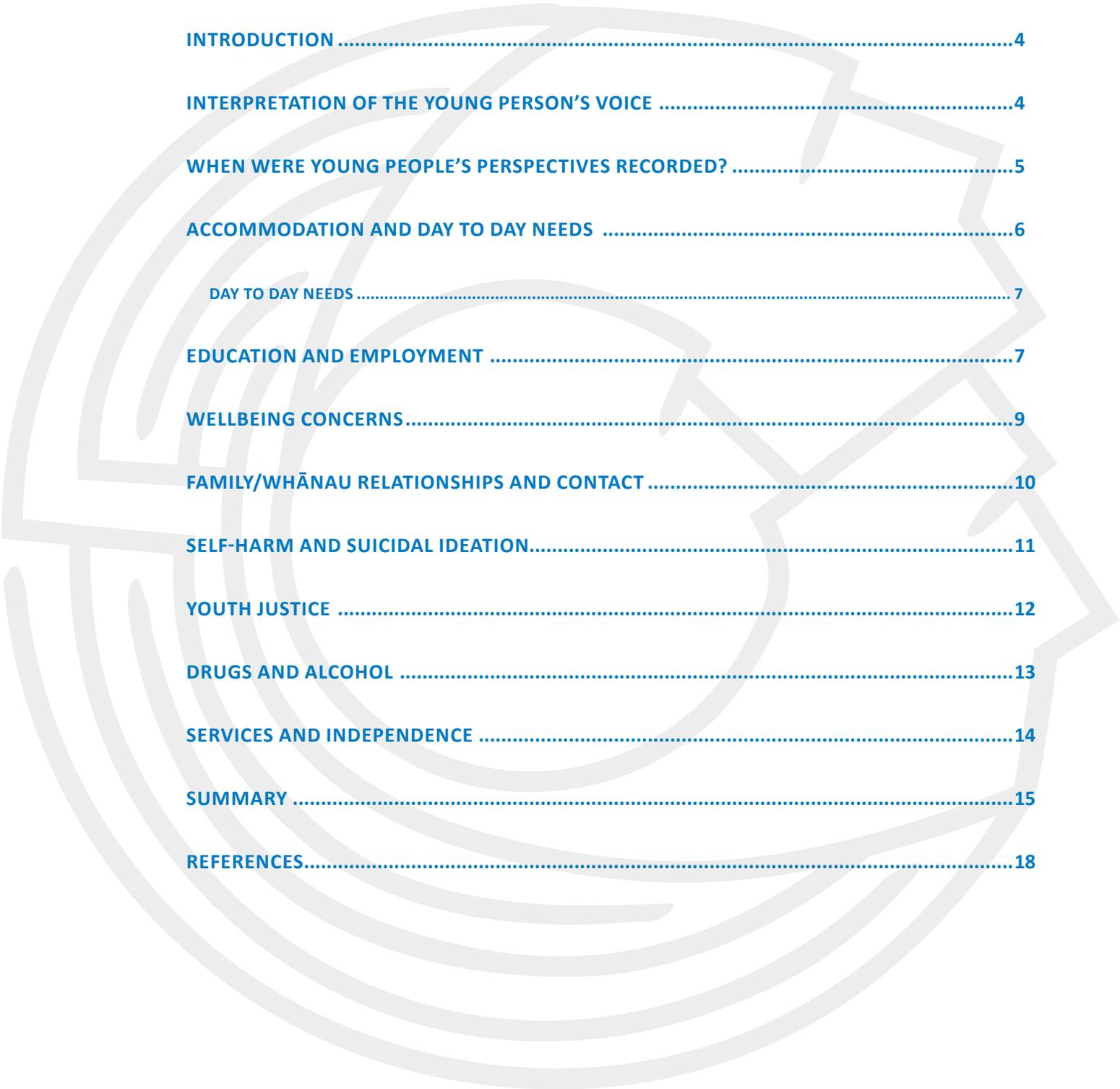
**Technical Report 11**

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## Introduction

This report discusses findings from the analysis of the case file summaries contained within the young person's voice node<sup>1</sup>. This node captured information on the opinions and perspectives of young people about a range of issues, as described in case file summaries. Given the centrality of young people's experiences to this research, it was important to include this node in our analysis. Evidence of the young people's opinions and perspectives were found in a substantial proportion of the case file summaries. This report discusses:

- Interpretation of the young person's voice
- When were young person's perspectives recorded
- Accommodation and day to day needs
- Education and employment
- Wellbeing concerns
- Family/whānau relationships and contact
- Self-harm and suicidal ideation
- Youth justice
- Drugs and alcohol
- Services and independence

## Interpretation of the young person's voice

The information recorded in the young person's voice node comprised interpretations of what young people had said rather than verbatim quotes from the young people themselves. The data analysed for this report was sourced from case files written by professionals. In these files there were also examples of other people retrospectively

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1 Data collection and analysis methods are outlined in *The Pathways to Resilience research programme: Review and analysis of case file summaries: Overview* (Stevens et al., 2014b), which also provides details on the qualitative descriptors used in this report.

reporting on what young people had said, such as parents, educators or youth workers. In a few cases research team members were able to capture verbatim quotes from young people; however, most of the information was recollections of what the young person had said as captured by professionals (Stevens et al., 2014b). In this way, the young person's voice node was a cache for the perspectives and opinions of the young people in the sample.

### **When were young people's perspectives recorded?**

The analysis of the file summaries revealed that young people's perspectives were recorded from across all age brackets. The majority of files included views from young people who were aged 13 to 18 years of age. The perspectives of young people when they were under the age of ten were less commonly recorded than when they were older. While this may, to some extent, reflect data collection processes, it may also suggest the views of younger children were recorded by professionals with less frequency than those who were older. These findings may be also explained in part by the very young ages (e.g. under five years) of some of the young people at the first notification.

There was a wide variation about how often young people's views were recorded; some case file summaries included very few instances while others contained many. Most recordings of young people's views were examples of day to day discussion between the young people and their social workers. There were no instances recorded within this node of young people expressing that their perspectives were not considered.

Young people's views were recorded in relation to a number of issues; accommodation and day to day needs, education and employment, wellbeing, family/whānau relationships and contact, self-harm and suicidal ideation, justice, drugs and alcohol, services and indepen-

dence were the key themes contained within case file summaries where young people's perspectives were noted. These key themes are discussed in the following sections.

## **Accommodation and day to day needs**

Analysis of case file summaries suggested accommodation was an important issue for young people, with many instances recorded of young people expressing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their accommodation circumstances, or articulating a desire to change their living situations. Young people stated what they planned on doing (for example, moving without approval), or requested that their social worker find them a new placement, or approve a home that the young person themselves had chosen.

On several occasions young people stated that they would abscond, either to avoid a decision or future plan made by their social worker, or because they were unhappy or bored with their living situation. A few young people said that they would run away to effect a change in their living situations. Case file summaries showed several instances where young people refused to follow through with plans, such as moving to a specialist residence, and argued about decisions or plans about their lives. Analysis identified a small number of occasions where young people asked to talk to someone who would give them what they wanted. In many cases young people actively attempted to influence their environs, and in more than one instance young people in residence stated they would commit a minor offence necessitating that they be moved to the secure unit, so that they could have a break away from fellow residents or the programmes of the day. Similarly, absconding or threats of absconding were often recorded in case file summaries, and several young people ran away, to then phone their social worker and report that they would be back at a later time. One young person in residential care commented that go-

ing to visit friends was not the same thing as running away. Case file summaries commonly described young people displaying frustration at the rules under which they were made to live, especially regarding drinking alcohol and smoking. Conversely, some young people also expressed concerns about living outside of the care system and without the assistance of professionals. Many of these latter concerns arose as the young people moved towards independence. Further information about matters regarding young people's accommodation is included in the reports on social service practice (Stevens et al., 2014c) and young people's behaviour (Urry et al., 2014).

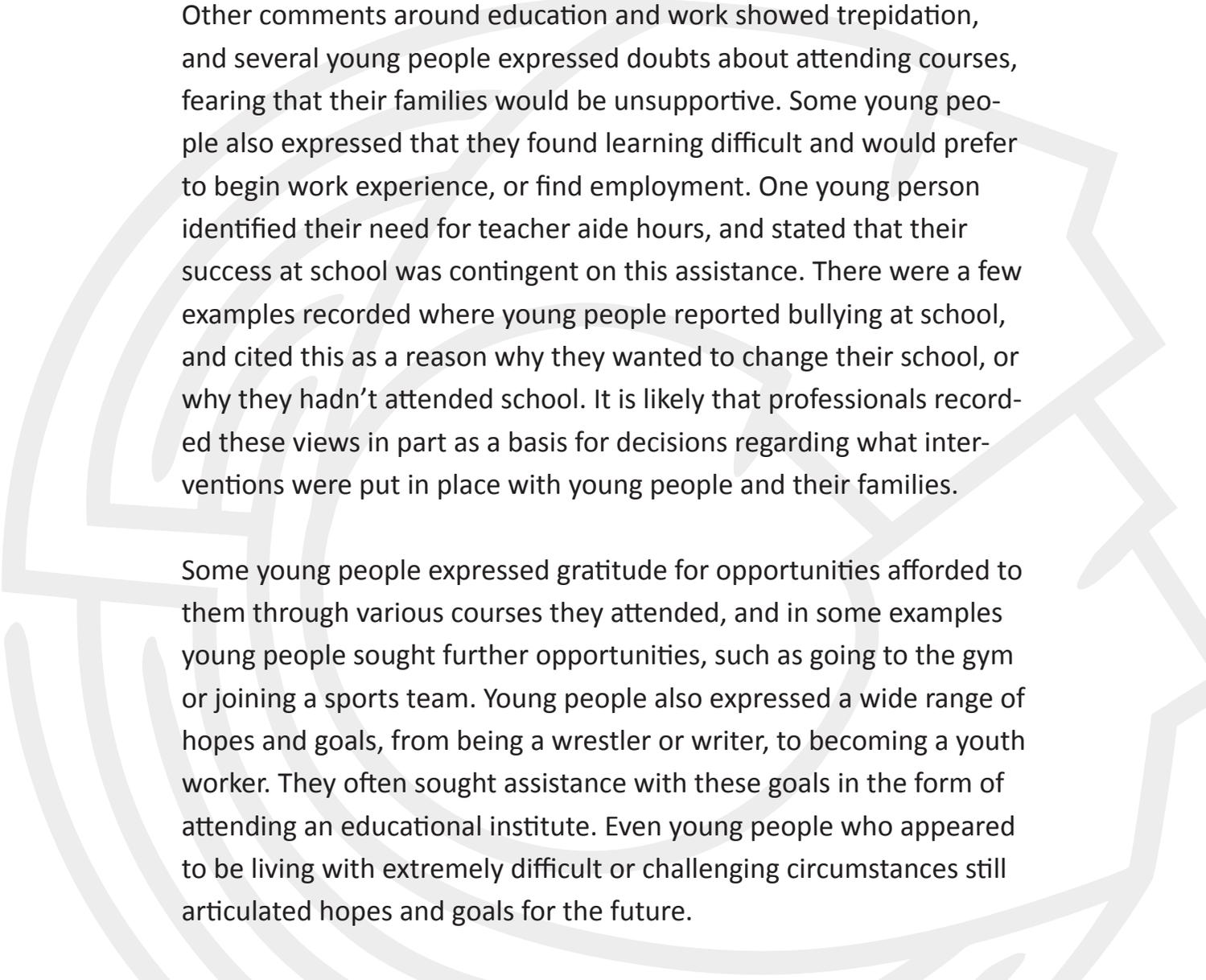
### **Day to day needs**

While there were many requests directly relating to accommodation, case file summaries also recorded numerous other requests young people made to social workers regarding their day to day needs. One young person wanted copies of family/whānau photos, another requested assistance to open a bank account. On some occasions young people also stated their immediate needs to their social workers, such as requiring new clothing or dental attention. Requests for Christmas or pocket money, or money for lunch or transport were also recorded.

Overall there were many examples where young people talked about accommodation and their day to day needs. Primarily they requested changes to their living situations, and conveyed clearly the impact that their living situations had on their happiness, sense of agency, and ability to have some control over their circumstances.

### **Education and employment**

Case file summaries recorded many instances of young people talking about their education or work situations. Often the comments were positive, where young people conveyed happiness with their school



or work situations, or articulated a desire to find appropriate courses to attend, or to seek work. They often requested help with these. Other comments around education and work showed trepidation, and several young people expressed doubts about attending courses, fearing that their families would be unsupportive. Some young people also expressed that they found learning difficult and would prefer to begin work experience, or find employment. One young person identified their need for teacher aide hours, and stated that their success at school was contingent on this assistance. There were a few examples recorded where young people reported bullying at school, and cited this as a reason why they wanted to change their school, or why they hadn't attended school. It is likely that professionals recorded these views in part as a basis for decisions regarding what interventions were put in place with young people and their families.

Some young people expressed gratitude for opportunities afforded to them through various courses they attended, and in some examples young people sought further opportunities, such as going to the gym or joining a sports team. Young people also expressed a wide range of hopes and goals, from being a wrestler or writer, to becoming a youth worker. They often sought assistance with these goals in the form of attending an educational institute. Even young people who appeared to be living with extremely difficult or challenging circumstances still articulated hopes and goals for the future.

It is unclear from the case file summaries whether the young people developed their goals and plans independently, or whether they were directed to generate these aspirations by professionals. However, at times discussions around goals appeared to be independent of planning or requirements set out by any external agencies, beyond the scope of what would be professionally approved of for future plans or goals (such as having a baby with no supports in place). Analysis of this node suggested the majority of hopes and goals young people

described related to building toward future independence through education or employment. Overwhelmingly, young people articulated a desire to attend an educational institute, or to be employed, and identified these options as crucial to future success.

## **Wellbeing concerns**

Case files summaries included many instances of young people disclosing information to services and professionals about their families, which raised concerns for young people's wellbeing. These included disclosures about abusive family/whānau situations, family violence, normalisation of crime within the family/whānau, negative attitudes of family/whānau members towards education or training, drug use, mental health concerns, unstable housing situations, and financial exploitation of the young people by members of their family/whānau (Stevens et al., 2014a). In more than one case, young people reported issues concerning their medication, for example that it hadn't been collected or administered or that they or others had sold it, and consequently the young person did not have access to it. These situations necessitated further outside agency involvement with families, such as input from the Police. There were also a few situations where young people identified that their parents could not survive financially without them, because of the welfare benefits they received by caring for the young person, or because they accessed the benefits that the young people themselves were entitled to (such as the Independent Youth Benefit). A small number of young people reported being encouraged to steal by their families. Case file summaries reported several instances where young people stated that their experiences of abuse were minimised or denied by their families, or where young people reported they had been told by family/whānau members not to disclose anything to agencies. These appeared to be efforts by family/whānau members to minimise agency involvement and/or to prevent young people from potentially

incriminating anyone in their close family/whānau network (Stevens et al., 2014a).

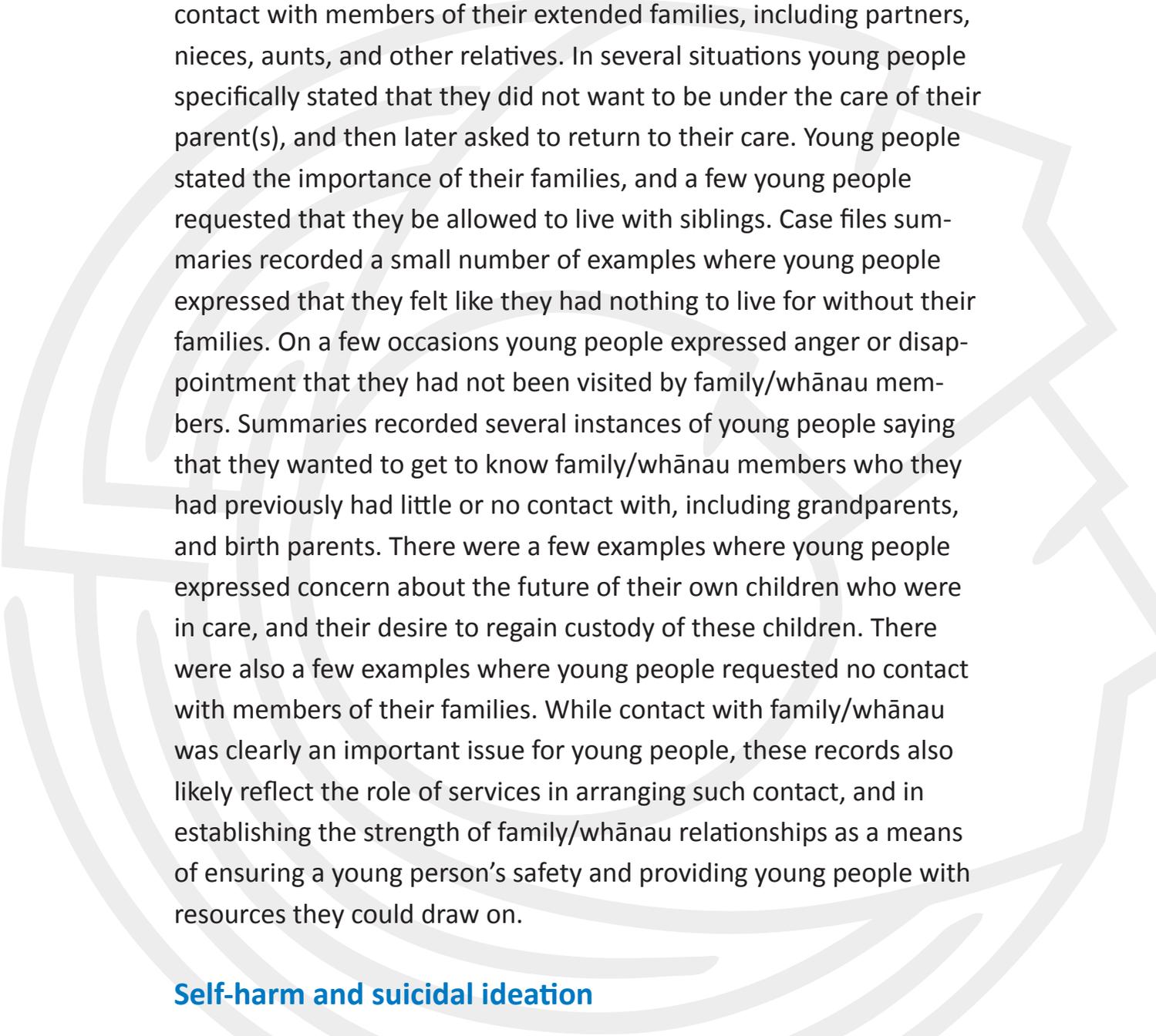
Young people also disclosed abuse by people outside of their families. Types of abuse disclosed ranged from emotional abuse to sexual assault and rape. On several occasions peer to peer violence was discussed in a casual way, with young people being on either the giving or receiving end. Some young people cited violence as a tool which helped them achieve their desired outcomes, such as changes of accommodation, while young people who were the targets of violence sometimes downplayed these incidents.

Analysis suggested that on several occasions young people sought assistance with these problems and/or wanted their disclosures to be investigated, while at other times these disclosures simply acted as explanations for the young person making the decisions they did, such as running away from an abusive home situation. In these latter cases it appeared the young person was not looking for assistance, rather they were explaining and validating their choices to professionals (Urry et al., 2014).

Analysis also suggested young people had an awareness of their vulnerabilities while in care, and shared concerns about abuse while in care either for themselves or their own children. There were several examples where young people stated that they had the ability to protect themselves and cited times when they had to protect themselves in the past.

### **Family/whānau relationships and contact**

Analysis revealed many examples recorded in case file summaries where young people talked about their families including some instances where young people stated that they wished to have more



contact with family/whānau members. This did not always relate to their immediate family/whānau as young people requested more contact with members of their extended families, including partners, nieces, aunts, and other relatives. In several situations young people specifically stated that they did not want to be under the care of their parent(s), and then later asked to return to their care. Young people stated the importance of their families, and a few young people requested that they be allowed to live with siblings. Case files summaries recorded a small number of examples where young people expressed that they felt like they had nothing to live for without their families. On a few occasions young people expressed anger or disappointment that they had not been visited by family/whānau members. Summaries recorded several instances of young people saying that they wanted to get to know family/whānau members who they had previously had little or no contact with, including grandparents, and birth parents. There were a few examples where young people expressed concern about the future of their own children who were in care, and their desire to regain custody of these children. There were also a few examples where young people requested no contact with members of their families. While contact with family/whānau was clearly an important issue for young people, these records also likely reflect the role of services in arranging such contact, and in establishing the strength of family/whānau relationships as a means of ensuring a young person's safety and providing young people with resources they could draw on.

### **Self-harm and suicidal ideation**

Case file summaries recorded instances where young people expressed suicidal ideations. A few of these instances were retrospective, but some reported young people who currently felt suicidal or at risk of self-harming. In a few of these examples, young people stated they felt like they could commit suicide if specific events didn't

come to pass, such as if they didn't get to live where they wished to. Instances where young people expressed feelings of depression or sadness were commonly recorded in case files, and often related to specific circumstances such as relationship difficulties with classmates, or uncertainty about living situations.

While in some cases self-harm and suicidal ideation were central to young people's concerns, extensive recordings of such disclosures in the file summaries were likely, in part, to reflect agencies' concerns about the potential for young people to harm themselves, and their processes and protocols in response to such concerns.

### Youth justice

Young people's opinions on legal and/or youth justice matters were regularly recorded in case file summaries. Several young people displayed awareness regarding their legal rights, with a few young people enquiring about their lawyers. One young person specifically asked how to go about firing their lawyer, while another expressed frustration that they had not been visited by their lawyer. Some young people expressed indifference to their legal situations. Analysis suggested several young people showed an understanding of the justice system and what factors would work in their favour. A few young people commented that attending courses would look good for them in court. One young person requested to view their files in advance of their court appearance.

Analysis of the case file summaries showed that young people's views and perspectives were recorded with regularity for young people in youth justice residences. These recordings were usually part of residence case work notes or incident reports (e.g. reports on incidents where young people broke rules or had contraband). Information recorded in file summaries often appeared to be the young person's

response to a question. This implied that specific residential policies or procedures required young people in youth justice residences to be informed and involved in plans regarding their care. They were asked specific questions and these discussions were recorded in the case files. Diverse issues were recorded including: upcoming court appearances, issues with the unit they were in, accessing education, organising family/whānau contact, health and fitness, smoking, and problems in relationships with staff or other residents. There were many examples where young people expressed what they liked and disliked about being in a youth justice residence. Several young people identified the educational opportunities they had while in residence, and commented positively about these. Several identified positive relationships with staff.

There were some instances of young people in residences saying that they would instigate some kind of incident so that they could go to the secure unit. Young people also commented on where they wished to go after leaving residence, with a small number citing addresses where they would like to be bailed to. A few young people identified that they would possibly end up in prison, and one young person stated that they were not worried about this prospect because they had family/whānau in prison who would take care of them. Young people appeared savvy when it came to their legal rights and displayed an awareness of how to make systems work for them. While some young people expressed concern at their legal situations, others expressed indifference and perceived their time in a youth justice residence and potential incarceration as inevitable.

## **Drugs and alcohol**

Young people's comments on their drug and alcohol consumption were commonly recorded in case file summaries. Analysis suggested these discussions were primarily in response to inquiries from profes-

sionals, or arose during screening or other professional assessments. Generally young people drew a distinction between smoking, alcohol, and illegal drugs, and often stated that they would smoke and drink but did not take drugs. Some young people identified their drinking or drug taking habits as problematic, and said that they would like to stop. Commonly familial or peer pressures were identified as factors that contributed to young people's ongoing drug consumption, and also presented barriers to quitting. Several young people stated that there was no problem with the amount of alcohol or drugs that they used, and a few young people described their living situations and involvement with services as a barrier to them enjoying alcohol and drugs recreationally with friends.

### **Services and independence**

Young people's views on services they were involved with were commonly recorded in case file summaries and ranged from appreciative to hostile. Several young people expressed their appreciation for residential programmes they participated in, and stated that these services had helped them. Several young people were tentative when offered counselling, but eventually agreed to attend. Other young people stated that counselling or therapy had helped them, and some asked to attend drug and alcohol programmes, or agreed to attend programmes when offered. Several young people spoke up when they were unhappy with professionals they were interacting with, and made requests for new counsellors, social workers or caregivers.

Several case file summaries recorded instances where young people stated concerns about abuse occurring while in care and identified that being in care did not necessarily mean that they were safe. There were several instances where young people reported resentment or anger felt by a member of their family/whānau towards the care agency. This was sometimes a response to interventions that had

impacted on the family/whānau, and at other times seemed symptomatic of a general wariness felt by family/whānau members towards any agency becoming involved with the family/whānau.

Some young people questioned whether services could really do anything to help their situation. While some young people described apprehension as they approached discharge from care, and conveyed worries about living independently, a few young people stated that they wished to cease involvement with services. File summaries included feedback from young people which suggested they were generally unhappy with restrictions placed on them by services (e.g. regarding curfews or use of alcohol) but in spite of this overarching frustration several young people acknowledged close relationships with certain professionals including social workers and caregivers. One young person who had been in care for most of her life acknowledged the significant and supportive role services had played, but was very much looking forward to the 'freedom' of independence and no longer having to give reasons for her actions.

Overall, case file summaries revealed a diverse range of comments which conveyed the complexity of dealing with agency involvement, particularly when multiple agencies became involved in young people's lives. While they often found these services helpful, young people made it clear when they thought that agencies had overstepped their bounds, and there was notable variation in young people's willingness to engage with services.

## Summary

The information contained in this report provides some insight into when and how young people's experiences and perspectives were documented by professionals in case files. Given how central young people's experiences were to the research, it was pertinent to include this node in our analysis of the case file summaries. Overall, the case file summaries contained many examples of day to day discussion between young people and their social

workers, although some case files included far more examples than others.

Young people's views were recorded around eight themes. These included accommodation and the young person's desire to choose where they lived; day to day challenges and future goals and plans regarding education, employment and transitions from care; matters impacting on young people's safety and wellbeing; relationships, contact and the complex role of family/whānau in young people's lives; disclosures of self-harm or suicidal ideation; their involvement and understanding of justice processes; drug and alcohol use as a problem and potential barrier to fulfilling goals, or as a recreational habit within the normal range of use; and young people's experiences with services including their appreciation for specific agencies, or a dislike and desire to live without involvement of services.

Analysis of this data suggested that the young person's voice was often recorded when young people demonstrated agency. Young people's attempts to exert autonomy in their lives included suggestions that they would abscond if their choice of accommodation was not met, or that they would create an incident while in residence, in order to be moved to a secure unit for time out, to get away from other young people, or to avoid particular requirements of the residential unit. Young people also demonstrated control over their lives in more positive ways when they shared plans and hopes for the future, and worked with services to meet these goals.

While the case file summaries included selections and interpretations of young people's authentic voice, what was captured and the method by which it was recorded, was influenced by the prescribed policies and procedures of services, as well as individual professional practice. There is scope for further analysis of how these mediated recordings align with the actual lived experiences of young people who are service users. This would provide further useful reflection on the practices of recording young people's voices, and contribute to a more equitable exchange of knowledge and experience between

services and young people, further validating young people's histories and experiences (Serido, Borden & Perkins, 2009).



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